

Irish whiskey is back from the abyss - and booming. Here's why.

M. Carrie Allan

Updated Mar 16, 2018 – 10.50am,
first published at Mar 15, 2018 – 11.00pm

Legend says St Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland. What drove out the distillers? That's a more complex tale. (And a truer one, since archaeological records indicate Ireland never had any snakes.)

It once had more than 1000 distillers, though, ranging from those running tiny farm stills making poitin (think Irish moonshine) to some of the largest distilleries in the world. Despite a long history of taxation by the British, Irish whiskey survived, and by the mid-1800s, Irish distilleries were making whiskey that the world wanted to drink.

Yet between that time and the 1940s, a series of trials and tribulations all but crushed Irish whiskey, dropping the number of commercial distillers in the country to three.



"Well over half of Irish whiskey is drunk straight," says whiskey writer Lew Bryson. "I think there's a direct reason for that." **supplied**

How the category not only survived but also staged a comeback is a story that should have whiskey lovers raising an appreciative dram. New distilleries are popping up around the country, there is talk of a boom and many young makers are preserving the best traditions while exploring new directions.

"It's quite incredible the different corners of the world that Irish whiskey was found in," says Carol Quinn, archivist for Irish Distillers Pernod Ricard, which produces some of the best-known brands, including Jameson, Powers and Redbreast.

"In 1905, if you're in Cairo, you can get a glass of Powers Irish whiskey, no problem whatsoever. At the same time, Jameson was selling enough in Honolulu that they actually had a specific label for Honolulu printed up. We have records from Uruguay, New Zealand, Australia, Canada – you name it, and Irish whiskey is being sold there.... It's a global drink at that point."

What's more, Quinn says, "it was a high-quality, high-status drink. If you were the type of person who enjoyed fine cognac or a good champagne, you drank Irish whiskey, and you expected to pay a little more for it, because you knew you were drinking a luxury product."

Prohibition and a trade war

The early 20th century brought major challenges: Prohibition in America not only closed off a major market, but it also damaged Irish whiskey's reputation, Quinn says. Some bootleggers were falsely selling under an "Irish whiskey" label because they knew they could charge more. Americans who tried this hooch probably found it "foul, fiery and burning," which made it more challenging for the real whiskey to come back after the 18th Amendment was repealed.

Irish whiskey hung on, but a trade war between Ireland and the United Kingdom in the 1930s was disastrous, "because that's when you lose all the markets associated with the British Empire," Quinn says.



According to DISCUS, since 2003, gross revenue for Irish whiskey is up more than 1000 per cent, with the biggest gains at the high end of the category. **Jennifer Soo**

Other whiskey-making countries, especially Scotland, gained market share with their blended expressions, while in Ireland, distillery after distillery closed down. In 1966, the three remaining Irish companies, John Jameson, John Power and Cork, merged to form Irish Distillers and consolidated their production; in 1988, Irish

Distillers became a subsidiary of Pernod Ricard. That 1966 merger and the later acquisition – which gave the company access to Pernod Ricard's global marketing capacity [<http://www.afr.com/markets/equity-markets/bottoms-up-to-pernod-ricard-20170724-gxhpvb>] – did a lot to get Irish whiskey back on a path to survival.

So did John Teeling, who in the late 1980s, after years of planning and work, ended Irish Distillers' longtime monopoly when he launched Cooley Distillery. His sons, Stephen and Jack, went on to launch Teeling Whiskey, initially using stocks of Cooley's whiskey, after Cooley sold to booze giant Beam Suntory [<http://www.afr.com/business/banking-and-finance/investment-banking/suntory-to-buy-maker-of-jim-beam-for-151bn-20140113-iy3q>] in 2012. Teeling is the first new distillery in Dublin in 125 years.

Now, says Stephen Teeling, "we're trying to revive some of the heritage and innovative ways in which Irish whiskey is made going back generations", while also trying to make it relevant for newer whiskey consumers by innovating with different grains (the mash bill) and aging in different types of casks.

From 60pc to 1pc of world market

Irish whiskey, Teeling says, "went from 60 per cent of the world's whiskey market to just 1 per cent in the '80s. It was just devastating.... But since Pernod Ricard has come in and a few other new innovations, Irish whiskey has been the fastest-growing grain spirit in the world, really blazing a trail... in the US, it's been growing double digits for the last 10, 15 years." In fact, according to DISCUS, since 2003, gross revenue for Irish whiskey is up more than 1000 per cent, with the biggest gains at the high end of the category.

Clearly, plenty of people like Irish whiskey. Do you? That depends on your tastes, of course, but if your ideas about what Irish whiskey is have been shaped by sports-bar party shots from one particularly ubiquitous bottle, you're in for some surprises.

Pages of legalese and distillerese go into defining types of whiskey and how they're made, but an extremely brief distillation: "Irish whiskey" must be distilled and

matured in Ireland, and be aged in wood for a minimum of three years. The whiskeys fall into one of three types: pot-still, malt or grain (a fourth category, blended, can be made with these three varieties). Pot still is made from a combination of malted barley, unmalted barley and other unmalted cereals; malt is made from 100 per cent malted barley ("single malts" are malt whiskeys from a single distillery); grain whiskey from malted barley and other unmalted grains.

Beyond those legalities, as whiskey writer Lew Bryson points out in his book *Tasting Whiskey*, as soon as you try to define Irish whiskey, you notice exceptions. Not all Irish whiskeys are triple-distilled, not all Irish whiskey is blended. "Knock your head against it long enough, and you'll realise the glib answer is the correct one: Irish whiskey is whiskey that's made in Ireland," Bryson writes.

Smooth

But he says Irish is a great place to start getting into the whiskey world. "Well over half of Irish whiskey is drunk straight," he says. "I think there's a direct reason for that: It's the approachability of the whiskey. 'Smooth' is an overused term, but you can't avoid it when you talk about Irish whiskey."

That said, "if all you've ever had is Jameson, it will give you one impression", says Philip Duff, a spirits educator who's doing some consumer education for the Knappogue Castle line of Irish single malts. "Think about Tennessee whiskey. Ninety-nine per cent sold is Jack Daniel's, but most people drinking it don't know that, and don't know what Tennessee whiskey is, and don't know the other brands. It's not quite that extreme, but Irish whiskey is dominated by Jameson sales, and that defines the category to a large degree."

"Jamo", as it's often referred to by dude-bros, is a lighter, blended whiskey, and it's by far the best-selling Irish whiskey in the world. It's helped carry the category and been a massive success story. Several sources reminded me (in a way that suggested they were really trying to remind themselves) that "there's nothing wrong with Jameson".

But it's a frustration to aficionados that Jameson's the only Irish whiskey many people have tasted. Back in the golden age, Duff says, Irish whiskey "was all single malt or pure pot still, extensively aged, and there was no pressure on bigger producers to cut corners, because they could charge a high price". Such whiskeys tend to be bigger, deeper and richer than the lighter Jameson blend millions think represents Irish whiskey.

Beyond 'Jamo'

For drinkers trying to branch out, Bryson says, he'd start them off on a specific bridge: Redbreast, which like Jameson is made at Irish Distillers' facility in Midleton. "Jameson is a blended whiskey, it's a good blended whiskey, but Redbreast is the heart of [what] makes that blend. Once they've had Redbreast, I'd try them on another single pot still . . . Bushmill's 16, the three wood. Tullamore [D.E.W.] Phoenix, a blended cask-strength Irish that delivers. Almost anything Teeling puts in a bottle."

The whiskey boom in Ireland and the wave of new players makes some whiskey lovers a little nervous. They worry that the drive to make a buck with cheap whiskey or marketing gimmicks will damage the category.

But overall, there's a great deal of excitement. "It is a bit of a gold rush with distilleries in Ireland," Duff says. "We'll see some great innovation, and we'll also see tons of stupid stuff, 'Unicorn Tears Whiskey'! Already there are all these absurd 'legendary people from Irish history' brand names being invented... But for every 'Unicorn Tears Whiskey' or whatever there will be a Knappogue Castle – something really remarkable."

It's very rewarding, says Stephen Teeling, when he shares their whiskey with someone and they say, "Jeez, I never knew Irish whiskey could taste like that." With all the new expressions that will be popping up in the coming years, we'll probably be hearing that a lot.

8 Irish whiskies worth meeting

Along with Jameson, Tullamore D.E.W. and Bushmills are two hugely popular lighter Irish blends. But if you want to go a little deeper in your Irish whiskey explorations, try some of these:

- 1 Redbreast 12-Year-Old Single Pot Still** (40 per cent alcohol by volume): The classic pot still Irish – a big, rich, spicy whiskey full of dried fruit notes, nuttiness and a sherry note from the Oloroso casks it's aged in.
- 2 Teeling Irish Single Grain** (46 per cent ABV): Bourbon lovers might be particularly interested in trying this one, which has a 95 per cent corn mashbill. Aged in ex-California Cabernet wine barrels, it has lovely vanilla, dried fruit, pepper and toffee notes.
- 3 Glendalough 13-Year-Old Mizunara Finish Single Malt Irish Whiskey** (46 per cent): This whiskey spent most of its years in ex-bourbon barrels but was finished in rare Japanese Mizunara oak; the result is a long, nutty, almost chocolaty finish - just beautiful.
- 4 Tyrconnell 16-Year-Old single malt** (40 per cent ABV): Lovely almond and roasted pineapple notes. Tyrconnell whiskeys are known for green apple and citrus flavours, which come from the even climate and double distillation.
- 5 Green Spot Single Pot Still** (40 per cent ABV): Spicy, honeyed, caramelly - another classic Irish pot still whiskey.
- 6 Knappogue Castle 12-Year Single Malt** (40 per cent ABV): It's mellow and fruity with notes of vanilla-butter and a bit of clove and other spices.
- 7 Connemara Peated Single Malt** (40 per cent ABV): The rare Irish whiskey that dries its barley using peat. It combines the honeyed, mellow spice character Irish whiskey is known for with a smoky peat note [<http://www.afr.com/business/retail/fmcg/why-peated-whisky-is-worth-persevering-with-20140820-jclv7>] that it definitely isn't.
- 8 The Dead Rabbit Irish whiskey** (44 per cent ABV): Produced in partnership with Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry, the founders of New

York City's much-lauded Irish bar, this is a nice blend of Irish single malt and grain whiskeys, with a good hit of vanilla and spice.